

ST. AGNES' EVE:

A CHIT-CHAT ABOUT KEATS.

God bless you, Oliver, don't think of such a thing! I join the temperance society!—why, you old curmudgeon, would you murder me outright? Not that temperance societies haven't done good—many a poor wife and weeping mother have they made happy—but, then, ever since I read Anacreon at college and shot buffalos at the Black Hills, I've had a fellow feeling for the good things of this life, especially for beef-steaks and port wine. I'm an Epicurean, sir—you needn't talk to me of glory—I despise the whole cant about posthumous renown. The great end of life is happiness, and happiness is best secured by gratifying our physical as well as our intellectual nature. I go in, sir, for enjoying existence, and when I was in my prime, I flatter myself that few could beat me at a dinner or had a more delicate way of making love to the girls. But alas! we have fallen on troublous times. The wine of these days—I say it with tears in my eyes—isn't the wine of my youth; and the girls—here's a health to the sweet angels—have sadly deteriorated from what their grandmothers were. *Eheu! Eheu!* The world is getting upside down, and I shouldn't wonder if an earthquake or epidemic or some other calamity should overtake us yet to fill up the catalogue of our ills.

I have just been reading Keats—shame on the wretches who tortured him to death! He is a practical argument, sir, for my creed. Genius he had unquestionably, yet he never enjoyed a happy hour. Why was this? Born in humble life, he thirsted for distinction, and trusting to his genius to achieve renown, found himself assailed by hostile critics, who dragged his private life before the public eye, and sneered at his poetry with the bitter scorn of fiends. He was naturally of a delicate constitution—of a proud and aspiring character; but of a modesty as shrinking as the sensitive plant; and when he found himself slighted, abused, maligned—when he saw that he was thrust back at every attempt to elevate himself, his delicate nature gave way, and he died of a broken heart, requesting that his epitaph might be, “Here lies one whose name was writ on water.” The world, since then, has done tardy justice to his genius—but this did not soothe his sorrows, nor will it reach him in his silent grave. What to him is posthumous renown?—what the tears of this generation or the plaudits of the next? Had he been less

sensitive, had he thirsted less after glory, he might still have been living, with matured powers, extorting even from his enemies deserved commendation. But he fell in his youthful prime, an eaglet pierced before it had learnt to soar. I have shed tears over his grave at Rome—let us drink to his memory in solemn silence.

Keats would have made a giant had he lived, sir. Everything he wrote evinced high genius. Each successive poem he published displayed increased merit. His sonnets remind me of Milton—his shorter pieces breathe of Lycidas or Venus and Adonis. He had little artistical skill, but then what an exuberant fancy! Few men had a finer perception of the beautiful, the *το καλον* of poetry. He is one of the most Grecian—if I may use the expression—of our poets. Shelley, perhaps, was more deeply imbued with the Attic spirit, but then, although his heart was always right, his intellect was always wrong, and thus it happens that his poetry is often mystic, obscure, and even confused. Keats was not so. He had this freshness without its mysticism. He delighted in themes drawn from classic fountains, in allusions breathing of Thessaly and the gods. There was in many of his poems a voluptuousness approaching to effeminacy, reminding one of the Aphrodite in her own fragrant bowers. In others of his poems there was an Arcadian sweetness. What is finer than his ode to the Grecian Urn? Do you remember the opening?

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness!
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities, or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?”

Delicious, is it not? You seem to be in classic Greece itself, amid the groves of Academus, by the fountain of Castaly, beneath the god-encircled Olympus. You can hear the Dorian flutes, you can see the daughters of Ionia. There are the priest and his assistants leading the flower-decked heifer to the altar—lo! a group of bacchantes singing and dancing through the vale. And high up yonder is the snowy temple of Jove—a picture for the gods!

You shake your head—you have no taste for classic allusions. Egad! I remember, you are a devotee of the German literature, and admire nothing which is not of the romantic school. Well, well—have you ever read “The Eve of St. Agnes?” It is—let me tell you—the poem for which Keats will be loved, and you ought to walk barefooted a thousand miles, like an ancient pilgrim to Loretto, for having neglected to peruse this poem. It is not so fine as Hyperion, but then the latter is a fragment. It is as superior to Endymion as a star to a satellite. It pleases me more than Lamia or Isabella. It has the glow of a landscape seen through a rosy glass—it is warm and blushing, yet pure as a maiden in her first exceeding beauty. As Burgundy is to other wines, as a bride blushing to her lover’s side is to other virgins, so is “The Eve of St. Agnes” to other poems. What luxuriance of fancy, what scope of language, what graphic power it displays! It is a love story, and right witchingly told. How exquisite the description of Madeline, her moonlit chamber, her awakening from her dream, and the delicious intoxicating emotions which break on her when she learns that she loves and is beloved. Ah! sir, we are old now, but I never read this poem without thinking of the time when I first pressed my own Mary to my side, and felt her little warm heart beating against my own. Egad, I will just skip over “The Eve of St. Agnes,” to pass the time away while we finish this bottle.

The poem opens with a graphic picture of a winter’s night. Draw closer to the grate, for—by my ancestry!—it is a freezing theme. I will read.

“St. Agnes’ eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp’d trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman’s fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith.”

The poet then proceeds to describe a festive scene, amid which is one fair lady, whose heart had throbb’d all day on love, she having heard old dames tell that maidens might, on St. Agnes’ eve, behold their lovers in dreams, if they observed certain mystic ceremonies. The lovely Madeline has resolved to follow the old legend, and she sighs, amid her suitors, for midnight to arrive. Then goes the story thus:

“Meantime, across the moors,
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,
Butress’d from moonlight, stands he, and implores
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
But for one moment in the tedious hours,
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things
have been.”

In that vast mansion, amid all that gay party, young Porphyro has but one friend, an old beldame, for all the rest are athirst for his blood and that of his line. While watching thus, the beldame discovers him and beseeches him to fly. He refuses. In her

garrulous entreaty she reveals to Porphyro that his mistress intends playing the conjurer to discover who shall be her lover. He eagerly makes a proposition, to which the old dame objects in horror, but after many protestations on his part and a rash declaration that otherwise he will reveal himself to his foes, she finally consents. And what was his proposition? Let the poet tell. It was

——“To lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline’s chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion’d fairies paced the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.”

The old dame accordingly leads the lover, through many a dusky gallery, to the maiden’s chamber, and then, hurriedly hiding him in a closet, is feeling in the dark on the landing for the stair,

“When Madeline, St. Agnes’ charmed maid,
Rose, like a missioned spirit unaware:
With silver taper’s light, and pious care,
She turn’d, and down the aged gossip led
To a safe level matting.”

Ah! we have few Madelines now-a-days. I love her for that act, as I would love an only daughter. Well may the poet exultingly say after this—

“Now prepare,
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove frayed and fled.”

The whole picture that follows is purity itself. We wish the wind would whistle less loudly without—there! it dies away as if in homage to this maiden soft. Shut your eyes and dream, while I read in whispers.

“Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:
She closed the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
As though a tongueless nightingale should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her doll.

A casement high and triple-arch’d there was,
All garlanded with carven imageries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger moth’s deep damask’d wings.
And in the midst, ’mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded ’scutcheon blush’d with blood of queens and kings.

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline’s fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven’s grace and boon:
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory like a saint:
She seem’d a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,
In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,
Until the popp'd warmth of sleep oppress'd
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;
Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray,
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
As though a rose should shut, and be a rose again."

And now, when the maiden is all asleep, her lover steals from his hiding place, and mixing a charm, kneels by her bedside, and while his warm unnerved arm sinks in her pillow, he whispers to her that he is her eremite, and beseeches her for sweet Agnes' sake to open her eyes. But the maiden, lying there in her holy sleep, awakes not. At length he takes her lute, and kneeling by her ear, plays an ancient ditty. She utters a soft moan. He ceases—she pants quick—and suddenly her blue eyes open in affright, while her lover sinks again on his knees, pale as a sculptured statue. And Madeline awakens, and thinking that her blissful dream is over, begins to weep. At length she finds vent for her words, and are they not sweet as the complainings of a dove?

"Ah! Porphyro!" said she "but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tunable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
How changed thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
O leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

If you have ever been young, and heard, for the first time, the blushing confession of her you loved in doubt and danger, you can form some conception of the bewildering joy which seized Porphyro at this. Egad! sir, I would give ten years of my life—old as I am—to enjoy such rapture. But no tongue except that of the poet can even shadow forth his ecstasy. Ah! to be loved is bliss, but to be loved by a Madeline—!

"Beyond a mortal man impassioned far
At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
Seen 'mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odor with the violet,—
Solution sweet:"

You can see the end of all this as well as I can, for though never has other mortal than Porphyro breathed the language of love into the ears of one like Madeline, yet we have all pleaded more than once in the ears of angels only one remove less beautiful. Shut your eyes, and fancy you see the lover kneeling by the bedside of that white-armed one, fragrant and pure as a lily in the overshadowed brook—lovelier than an Imogen, whose very breath perfumes the chamber. Hear her low complainings when she fancies that her lover is about to desert her. Are they not more musical than the zephyrs sighing through the moonlit pines? And then how soothing is Porphyro, and how delicately he allays her fears. Ah! the moon is down, and the chamber is in darkness—and there, as I live, the rain-drops are pattering against the casement. Now is thy time, bold Por-

phyro—St. Agnes will befriend thee—urge, urge that sweet lady, with all thy eloquence, to seize the chance and fly amid the confusion. We know how it will end! Love ever wins the day—and is not Madeline yet all blushing with her dream? And so—and so—hear the rest!

"She hurried at the words, beset with fears,
For there were sleeping dragons all around,
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—
Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found,—
In all the house was heard no human sound.
A chain-dropp'd lamp was flickering by each door;
The arras, rich with horsemen, hawk, and hound,
Fluttered in the besieging wind's uproar;
And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms to the iron porch they glide,
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
The chains lie silent on the foot-worn stones;
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin worm,
Were long be-nightmared. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought-for slept among his ashes cold."

Who, after that, will say that Keats was not a genius? But "Hyperion," though less complete than this poem, evinces—let me tell you—even more of the "*mens diviniore*." "The Eve of St. Agnes" is warm, voluptuous, luxuriant, yet pure as a quiet pool with silver sand below—but "Hyperion" is bold, impassioned and colossal, Miltonic even in its grandeur, overpowering at times as a thunder-storm among the mountains. Would God that Keats had lived to finish it! With many faults, it evinces more genius than any poem since written in our language. Hear the speeches of the Titans!—read the description of Apollo!—drink in the intoxication of its less sublime but more beautiful passages! It often exhibits a redundant fancy—the style is at times affected, and the choice of words bad—the execution is careless, though less so than that of Endymion—and, above all, the plan of the poem, so far as it has been developed, bears an unhappy resemblance to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Yet it displays such extraordinary genius, that we will never forgive the Quarterly for having disheartened Keats from the completion of this poem. Ah! sir, what has the world lost?

I repeat it, I am an Epicurean. Fame!—immortality!—what are they? We wear out our lives for a bauble, and coin our souls away to purchase dross. We dig our own graves and call it GLORY. Away with such sophistry! Go over the melancholy list of unfortunate genius—White, Collins, Keats, Chatterton and the rest—and tell me what they reaped except thorns! Ah! sir, it melts my heart with pity—I must take a glass on it. But, I declare, the bottle's out, and—by my halidome!—here is Oliver asleep.

J. S.